The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

No. 66 JANUARY 29TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

There have been a number of letters about the problem of shelters. Several members have urged that, while everything possible must be done to improve conditions in the shelters and to provide for the homeless, those who for the sake of privacy brave the worst in their homes and sleep in their Anderson shelter or a brick box or under the stairs must not be forgotten and deserve every help and encouragement. Lord Horder speaking recently at Manchester urged people to stay at home and sleep above ground, and foretold the introduction of mobile squads to instal shelters indoors. Part of the solution of the problem of the shelters is a campaign of education to increase the number of those who face the risks of bombing with courage and good sense and resist the lure of the crowd. The country cannot afford at the present time to have more people than is unavoidable who require to have things done for them; every citizen needs to be encouraged to react to total war in a positive and constructive way. In particular, it is necessary to induce as many as possible to take advantage of the facilities of evacuation; parents who subject their children to the conditions of shelter life when means of avoiding this exist need to be shown the selfishness and unwisdom of such action.

REORGANISATION OF CHURCH RESOURCES

It is widely felt that the resources of the Churches are not being used to the greatest advantage, and that large changes in organisation are imperative if the Churches are to meet the needs and opportunities of the post-war period. Few things will do more to create confidence among lay men and women than evidence that these issues are being faced and that action is being taken. An account in the current issue of *Theology* by the Dean of Poplar of developments in the Church life of that borough is highly encouraging and shows that the Church is alive and moving.

The clergy belonging to that deanery realised before the war that, if the Church was to become an effective evangelising force, there must be a drastic revision of its methods of using its man power and its material resources. An examination of the religious situation in the borough showed that in all the Christian Communions there were strong centres, with sufficient resources to tackle their work effectively, and weak centres, so understaffed that their efforts were exhausted in the struggle to keep the Church alive at all. The war has made the problem much more acute. Before the war came the Poplar clergy had agreed that the parson's freehold must not be allowed to stand in the way of reorganisation and that they were ready to place themselves at the Bishop's disposal. He has now decided to use his emergency powers and introduce a policy of grouping of parishes; that is to say, for the duration of the war several parishes will be united under one leader. In one instance five parishes have been grouped. Two of the churches will probably be closed. A young leader and a young staff, which will number six, or possibly eight, will be responsible for the whole work. It will be possible, if this should seem desirable, to concentrate the work of the staff on different districts at different times, or to assign one or more of the clergy to specialised tasks. It is believed that this concentration of resources will enable the Church to leave the defensive and engage in vigorous attack.

BULLETIN OF THE CHURCHES GROUP

What is known as the Churches Group, a joint committee composed of representatives of the Churches and the National Council of Social Service, has decided to issue a Bulletin, the first number of which has just appeared.[1] Its purpose is to supply essential information about social service questions to ministers of religion throughout the country. The first issue deals (among other matters) with evacuation services, calling attention in particular to some of the urgent needs of the present moment, and with the activities of neighbourhood groups which attempt to give expression in practical action to the spirit of the good neighbour.

THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER IN AMERICA

From its inception the Christian News-Letter has had many friends in America. We are delighted to hear that steps are being taken by a group of leading American Christians to issue a weekly periodical, similar in many of its features to the Christian News-Letter, to be called *Christianity and Crisis*.[2] We are told also that the Supplement by the Archbishop of York (C.N.-L. No. 41) aroused particular interest; it was reprinted in the *Christian Century* and later in pamphlet form and has had a large circulation.

THE SUPPLEMENT

A year ago we published as a Supplement (C.N.-L. No. 15) part of a letter by Professor Karl Barth to the editor of a French religious magazine. This week we give in translation the full text of a further letter by him to the Protestant Christians in France. The address by Swiss laymen to the Swiss Churches in our Supplement a fortnight ago, the letter from France last week, and now this letter of Professor Barth, give a vivid picture of what is happening in the minds and experience of Christians on the continent. I hardly expected that in present circumstances so rich a mine of information would open up.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

[1] Particulars may be obtained from the National Council of Social Service, 26 Bedford Square, London, W.C.1, or the Commission on International Friendship and Social Responsibility, 21 Meadow Way Green, Letchworth, Herts.

[2] We have been informed by cable that the British subscription will be 6s. post free. Orders may be sent to Dr. H. S. Leiper, 297 Fourth Avenue, New York City, U.S.A.

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THE CHRISTIAN NEWS-LETTER

Supplement to C.N.-L. No. 66

JANUARY 29TH 1941

A QUESTION AND REQUEST TO FRENCH PROTESTANTS

DEAR FRIENDS AND BRETHREN,

On this occasion it was one of the youngest of the ministers of the Gospel in your country who took upon himself to urge me, as Pastor Westphal did last year, to address you in an open letter. In view of the developments which have taken place in the interval I have for long felt an obligation to follow up in some way what I wrote a year ago.

My last letter had in the main a friendly and understanding reception. I may therefore hope that what I now wish to write to you will not be regarded as the unwarranted interference of an outsider and non-participant.

In the need and task of our time there are no outsiders and non-participants. There may be many who think themselves such, but none are so in reality. This is much plainer to-day than it was a year ago. The war between the nations, which had then begun as a smouldering fire and has since become an all-devouring flame, is the necessary form of a conflict which is not confined by national boundaries, but cuts right across the nations (including the neutrals and not least the Germans themselves), and which everywhere in one way or another compels men to a clear and binding decision—to a Yes or a No, in full view of all conceivable consequences. We all find ourselves immersed in this conflict. We are all involved in its origin and continuance, and we are all, on one side or other of the gulf, involved in its solution, whatever this may be, as sharers in common action, common responsibility, common guilt and common suffering.

These being the grounds on which I take the liberty to address you again, dear fellow-believers in France, I can without further preface explain to you at once what are the question and the request I wish to put to you.

First, the question. It is true, is it not, my French friends, that we are agreed with regard to what has just been said? We were so a year ago. And surely we are so to-day—that is, after, as well as before, all that has happened? It is true, is it not, that the armistice concluded between France and Germany has not altered in any respect the fact that you too are still, and even more now, involved in the conflict which is the root cause of the war and in the responsibility for the existence of the conflict and for its solution.

And now to add to this question my request. We know how much you are necessarily preoccupied at present with your particular national need and task. But you will not withdraw into it, as though it were your own private concern? You will not seek after solutions which would lead you to a neutral attitude in face of the great decision which now, as before, confronts you, as it does all of us, and on which in the last resort —for you in particular—nothing less than all depends? We count on you that, as Christians and as Frenchmen, you will not leave us in the lurch, but will stand with us on the same side of the abyss—stand with us both inwardly, with your faith and prayers, and—as a result of this—according to your insight and your ability, also outwardly, with your words and deeds, just as definitely as a year ago—nay, more definitely and convincedly, because of the added experience and knowledge of the past year. Just because we love and respect France now as much as before, we cannot and will not for the sake of any specifically French concern, let you go. We need you. Do not separate your cause from ours, since ours, as truly now as formerly, is also yours.

I have been told that many of you after the events of last summer have remembered and pondered over the last part of my earlier Christmas letter, where I said that it was unchristian and unwise not to reckon with the possibility of the war taking a turn quite contrary to our wishes and expectations, with " signs and wonders of the Antichrist," with a coming judgment of God on ourselves, and that we must be ready to submit ourselves to the will and commandment of God even in such unwished-for circumstances. Then and only then, if we were prepared even for that, I wrote at that time, could the necessary work of resistance against Hitler's National Socialism be joyfully and confidently accomplished. That was in no sense an attempt to assume the rôle of a prophet. I wrote as I felt I must write in the circumstances of that

time in the discharge of my responsibility to the Holy Scriptures. What actually took place in May and June I, just as little as others, did not at all foresee. It was certainly not a good omen that the French censor then thought it necessary to suppress the last part of my letter as "defeatist." It may be that the reason why the French resistance could not be so joyful and confident as to become effective was that men were too little ready to take into account that man proposes but God disposes.

However, be that as it may, the very thing happened which we had all least desired and expected, worse than the worst we had imagined. I may tell you, that my brother Peter Barth, who died on the evening of June 20th, in the extreme weakness of the last hour of his life exclaimed, "But we will not withdraw beyond the Loire!" "We"—do understand, dear French friends, that many of us during those weeks were living in immediate union with you. Yet you (and we with you) had to withdraw far, far beyond the Loire. I need not here enter into details, which are better known to you than to me, and I for my part have no wish to use any of the harsh words which have been spoken and heard often enough in France itself to describe and explain that whole happening. Whatever the thing may be called, and whatever accusations or self-accusations may be made in regard to it, it was a simple fact that the military capacity of Hitler's Germany was able on this occasion to gain the upper hand, and that after Poland, Norway, Denmark, Holland and Belgium, France too is prevented for the time being from further co-operation in the necessary war against that Germany. It has come to pass that just in these circumstances you have now to submit yourselves to God's will and commandment.

But if, as is probably the case, you are more inclined to-day to remember especially that last part of my Christmas letter, I must also ask you to lay to heart that in the rest of what I then wrote to you there is nothing that needs to be taken back to-day. What change has there been, so far as you are concerned? This, certainly, that to-day for the time being (for the duration of the armistice) you have reasons—I refrain from enquiring whether they are good or bad reasons—for not wanting any longer, or at least not at present, to carry on the war. But there is one thing, surely, that has not changed even for you, but has rather been strengthened; the reason that is to say, which led you a year ago—led you as Christians—to endorse this very same war and to prosecute it with all earnestness. Need I remind you that a whole ocean of actual events, of enemy success and of our own failure, does not necessarily contain for us as Christians a single drop of truth? The recognition that we under-estimated others and over-estimated ourselves is a good and necessary thing. This recognition, however, has nothing to teach us about what is right or wrong or about the responsibility and decision which follow on our knowledge of right or wrong. I cannot think that your judgment of to-day about the fundamental situation between Hitler and the rest of us is different from a year ago just because in the meantime Hitler has had so many good days (vividly reminding us of Job xxi and Psalms x and lxxiii) and France, together with all those other countries, so many bad days. If that were your attitude, you would have surrendered, not merely to the German arms, but to that German philosophy which in 1933 broke out like a plague among the German people themselves. In that case, Hitler would have conquered not only your country but your souls. I not only hope, but I know, that this is not so—in any case not so far as you, the sons and heirs of the French Reformation, are concerned. I know you are still able and willing to see through the terrible fog of a confusion between the Word of God and the language of brutal facts, just as in Germany itself I know people who have shown to this day the capacity and will to see through this confusion. I take it for granted that among your Roman Catholic brethren too, and also among the true heirs of the Revolution of 1789, there are not lacking those who have refused to be seduced by the false lure of the German realism of 1933. But to you, at least, the sharers of my own faith, I can press home the proposition that in regard to the grounds, the necessity and the right of the war against Hitler—even though it is at the moment not your war, but is being waged by others in the Channel, over London, in Egypt (and who knows where to-morrow?)—for you too nothing has changed, nothing at all. National Socialism itself, with its lies and cruelties, its arbitrary justice, its persecution of the Jews and concentration camps, its attacks upon, and poisoning of, the Christian Church, its fundamental denial of freedom and consequently of responsibility for thought and speech, its conscious and wicked repudiation of spiritual values—National Socialism as the "Revolution of Nihilism," has not changed, even in the smallest particular. It has only proved itself to be more efficient in war than we thought and become more powerful than we wished. It has only conquered a certain number of nations, including your own, just

as it first conquered the German nation, the most unfortunate of all. It has merely won a further opportunity of applying its methods in Poland, Norway and Holland, and it seems probable that France too will quickly have the chance, if it has not had it already, of learning what they are.

Do you know what it is that at the present time exercises the minds of Christians in Germany belonging to the Confessional Church more than the whole war? It is the putting to death on medical grounds, of certain " incurably " sick persons, carried out as a system on a large scale and made immune from criticism by the power of the police. Rumour has it that up to the present there have been 80,000 victims of this system. This is Hitler. To withstand this Hitler, when after mastering his own people he began to hurl himself against other nations and countries, was the clear purpose with which England and France in the autumn of 1939, after long hesitation, entered into the war. The fact that since then things have gone so extraordinarily well for Hitler and so badly for his opponents, that he has found in Europe and Asia allies among those who by their own nature were bound sooner or later to become such, that to-day he exalts himself like a god to force a new order of his own making upon the whole world, all this is no reason whatever for abandoning that purpose. For you also, even though you are at present no longer actually at war, all this is no reason for being untrue to that purpose. You must at least in your inmost heart be with those Frenchmen who have decided, and who have the opportunity of giving effect to the decision, to continue to carry on the war of the France of 1939. National Socialism is the same terrible, but at the same time inwardly empty and in the last resort utterly unreal, product of the underworld that it always has been. " One word shall quickly slay it," is as true to-day as yesterday. You, dear friends, can in fact remain neutral in this conflict no more to-day than yesterday.

If I have been well informed and understand the matter rightly there is much talk in Christian circles in the France of to-day about the humility with which one ought to acknowledge and accept the " total defeat " as a divine judgment. And further, about the penitence which is now necessary. And again, about a sorrowful silence in which one must address oneself to the modest tasks which still remain, or are beginning to emerge, under the provisional arrangements of the armistice. Much talk also about prayer, about preaching Christ crucified, about creating, preserving and encouraging a new public spirit, as the only possible way for you to co-operate to-day in matters which are the common concern of the Christian Church and the legal State. I understand all this, and I am doing my best to understand it with sympathy and trust. For I am a little disturbed by the fact that I seem to have heard all this before; that is to say, in the Germany after 1933, when she was overrun by National Socialism. At that time and in Germany it implied a retreat of Christianity from responsibility in ecclesiastical and political spheres to the inner sphere of a religious attitude which, in order to maintain itself, no longer concerned itself with, or at least was not willing to fight and suffer for, the right form of the Church, let alone that of the State. At that time and in Germany, all this meant the sanctioning of National Socialism by a rightly or, it may be, wrongly interpreted Lutheranism. Be perfectly clear that the demonic power of National Socialism of which you have now had experience yourselves, at any rate passively, is connected with the fact that Christianity in Germany did thus retreat. By recalling what took place in the Church struggle in Germany I certainly do not mean to say that those who to-day in France use the language of which I have spoken are already involved in this retreat. I only want to say that the promulgation of these sentiments, however well intentioned and relatively justified in the beginning, might be the first step in such a retreat, in which the Church would play directly into the hands of the arch-enemy, and in any case, of National Socialism. You will see to it that this does not happen.

Humility is an excellent thing. There is certainly no occasion for pride and, if we have been proud in the past, we have during the last half-year suffered a rude blow in the face. I am, however, troubled about the relation of this sudden emphasis on penitence both to the policy of the Vichy Government and to the apathy into which, if I am rightly informed, the great mass of your people has now sunk in the face of these fateful events. Is it not almost too much of an accommodation to the spirit of the times to fasten on humility as the preacher's theme to-day ? But let that be as it may. Let us only be sure that, if we preach about humility, it is a humility before God of which we are speaking, and not a humility before facts and circumstances, before Powers and Dominions, before men and human authorities. Humility before God can have nothing to do with resignation, nor with a stunned petrifaction before a destiny which we must recognise, at any rate for the time being, to be in a certain sense unalterable. If we were to give way to this, we should have surrendered

our faith and the enemy would already have triumphed over us. The secret of Hitler's being is that he knows how to produce this petrification all around him. Any true Christian preaching of humility in France to-day must keep far away from this kind of stupefaction.

It follows, if we are thinking of humility before God, that there can be no talk of "*total defeat.*" Has not the idea too many painful associations with the "total" purposes and claims of our adversary? How have we Christians come to apply the word "total" to anything but God's omnipotent grace? When and how can a human defeat become "total," unless Christians involved in it were to lose their faith in the omnipotent grace of God, and with it their inward joy and the courage to bear their Christian witness? It is this that must never be allowed to happen.

It follows, if we are thinking of humility before God, that the acknowledgment and acceptance of *God's judgment* will certainly not mean that we shall grow weary and allow ourselves to become confused about what we previously recognised to be God's commandment and will, and tried to carry out in obedience to Him. God's judgment is directed not against our obedience, but against the endless disobedience with which we have again and again overlaid our little bit of obedience. If God has judged us, He has been gracious to us; He has not in judging us cast us out into a self-chosen neutrality, but given us a new beginning and encouraged us to a purer obedience.

It follows that the *repentance* which is needed will not be limited to an unfruitful, merely general, submissiveness or a passive regret for faults committed in the past; still less will it find expression in forms of renewal and innovation which will in fact help the old Adam to even greater triumphs. But true repentance (in regard, for example, to liberty, equality and fraternity) will make us wholly in earnest where formerly we were light-minded, joyful where we were sceptical, strong where we were weak and slack. Repentance will lead us to watch and not to sleep; it will guide our steps to life and not to death.

It follows that *silence*, which has certainly much to commend it, will not be a mournful silence, but the natural and fruitful self-restraint of those who have privately too much to do to indulge freely in talk.

It follows that *prayer* will not lead us away from political thought and action of a modest but definite kind, but will rather lead us directly into purposeful conflict.

It follows that the new *public spirit* will be not only a goal, not only the subject of all kinds of teaching, pastoral work and discussion, but, above all and at once, a beginning—the spirit of a Christian repudiation of defeat, the spirit of a Christian approach to a new and better resistance, the spirit of the Christian hope which is not disposed to leave the field to the demons. How in the world can this spirit be created, maintained and encouraged except by practising it?

More than ever, and perhaps nowhere so much as in the France of to-day will the *crucified Christ*, if we are thinking of humility before God, be preached as the *risen Christ*—as the King, whose Kingdom has no boundaries, and whose servants can have no fear because He has overcome the world.

If I could understand them in this way, and could correct them a little, I would agree with these emphases. They would *not* mean that the *Church* of France has concluded an armistice. It is just this that the Church cannot and must not do, neither in the terms we have been considering nor in any others. In the Church in France the spiritual war must still go on. She cannot on any terms conclude a peace, or even an armistice, with Hitler. And in the Church in France, it must be, and remain, perfectly clear, that even the military armistice which the Vichy Government made with Hitler, can have only a provisional character.

Here I want to break off, though I know that it is just here that the practical questions begin. I lack the competence to take part in the discussion of these questions. Above all, the question of "Vichy"! You may imagine that I have my own opinion about it, and also an idea what my attitude would be were I a Frenchman. But I am not a Frenchman, and I consider it better in this matter, which is your special concern, to say only what I must say explicitly—that precisely in this matter your attitude is of decisive importance in the answering of my question and the fulfilment of my request.

I commend you, dear friends and brethren, to our God in all the difficult, temptation-strewn, dangerous ways which lie before you. May His peace which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds, and the hearts and minds of us all, in Christ Jesus.

With brotherly greetings!

KARL BARTH

Bâle, October 1940.

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